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Chinese Parents' Influence on Academic Performance

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Abstract: This article reviews the literature related to Chinese parents' influence on Chinese students' educational performance. Cultural values always play an important role in the educational achievement of Chinese students. Chinese parents are renowned for their willingness to sacrifice for the sake of their children's education. Parents have a significant influence in the academic performance of Chinese students.

Introduction

A healthy home environment offers emotional security to children (Holdaway, 1979, 1984). Schools cannot simply provide a continuation of the home environment (Wells, 1987), but they play an inestimably important role in laying the foundation for children to learn to read (Rasinski & Fredericks, 1988). Rasisnski & Fredericks (1988) stated that in the literacy development of children, parents play a crucial role. In Becoming a Nation of Readers , the Commission on Reading (cited by Rasinski & Fredericks, 1988) concluded that parents play an invaluable role in laying the foundation for (their children) learning to read, and that parents cannot shirk responsibility for supporting their children's continued growth as readers. People recognized the importance of parental involvement and guidance in the development of their children's reading behavior. The value of daily activities, such as reading aloud, is significant; bedtime stories are another good example (Rasinski & Fredericks, 1988).

When children are surrounded by caring, capable parents, and are able to enjoy nurturing and moderately competitive kinship relationships, a foundation for literacy is built with no difficulty. Such people provide children with the security they will need for desirable learning. It also helps children develop positive associations with the flow of story language and with the physical charac teristics of books (Holdaway, 1979, 1984).

The Chinese Culture: Influence on Students' Education

Knowledge of one's culture is passed on through oral and written tradition. Asian-American students, on the average, have the resources of multi-generational families in which stories and ac counts of elders and ancestors are passed on from one generation to another; this is especially the case among Chinese families. Furthermore, Asian-American students have the ability to draw upon the instructional and learning techniques of both the native and the new country toward the goal of mas tering skills and obtaining language proficiency. This set of values from one generation to another is a widespread feature of the perpetuation of culture (Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1992).

Asian-American students are doing considerably well in school, but they are still facing ad justment

problems of discrimination against Asian-American groups, as well as in economic situa tions. Sue and Okazaki (1990) indicated that despite prejudice and discrimination against Asian -American groups, their educational achievements have increased. Two factors were considered ma jor reasons for the continued academic success of Asian-Americans: possible hereditary or cultural advantages, and cultural in nature (Sue & Okazaki, 1990). For example, in their extensive observa tions in the three societies, Stevenson, Lee, and Stigler (cited in Sue & Okazaki, 1990) found that United States schools spent less time on academic activities, United States teachers imparted less information, and there was less emphasis on homework in the United States than in Chinese or Japanese schools. Sue and Okazaki (1990) stated that the most popular view is that the Asian family values and puts greater emphasis on academic success. Researchers have found out that Asian families demand and expect their children to do well academically, to obey authority figures, and to be aware of the sacrifices their parents have made for them and the need to fulfill obligations (Carrasquillo & London, 1993; Mordkowitz & Ginsburg, 1986). Mordkowitz and Ginsburg (1986) presented narrative support for a cultural explanation containing family socialization for high achievements. The students reported that their families underscored educational accomplishments, held high expecta tions for achievements, controlled the behavior of the students, and considered schooling very impor tant (Sue & Okazaki, 1990).

Asian students, especially Chinese students, try very hard to meet their parents' demands and expectations for doing well academically. Obeying authorities and keeping their parents' sacrifices in mind are considered proper behaviors among Chinese students. Chang (1973) stated that Chinese -American students willingly obey authority. She (Chang) cited a philosophy of classic realism which emphasizes an unchangeable social order over the dynamic values of Western society. Confucianism, the essential classic realism in Chinese society, presupposes the inherent inequality of most relation ships, and thus prescribes codes of behavior for each encounter. Chinese students bring this cultural knowledge of behavior to the classroom, and are able to expend energy in other, more productive endeavors.

Chinese-American students face conflicts between two divergent cultures: the culture they acquire at home, and the culture they acquire at school. Teachers need to be sensitized to their stu dents' cultural backgrounds and customs which may be different from those of the dominant society (Carrasquillo & London, 1993; Chang, 1973). Stevenson and Lee (1990) found that the significance placed upon academic achievement varies between cultures. They (Stevenson & Lee) also found that parents and teachers believe that the greater the emphasis on effort, the more likely it is that they (parents and teachers) can be helpful in aiding children in their academic achievement.

The Chinese philosopher Hsun Tzu (Sun Zi) (cited in Watson, 1967) wrote:

Achievement consists of never giving up. If you start carving and then give up, you cannot even cut through a piece of rotten wood; but if you persist without stopping, you can carve or inlay metal or stone. Earthworms have no sharp claws or teeth, no strong muscles or bones , and yet above ground they feast on the mud, and below they drink at the yellow springs. This is because they keep their minds on one thing. If there is no dark and dogged will, there will be no shining accomplishment; if there is no dull and determined effort, there will be no brilliant achievement (p. 18).

In Confucianism, the plasticity of human behavior is strongly emphasized. Chinese immi grants continue to utilize this Confucian construct of hard work as a tool to condition the mind. Kluckhohn (1961) symbolically divided the family identity into three categories: the individual, com prised of each member's perspective of the greater family unit; the collective, a family unit's perspec tive on the larger society; and lineage, the function of chronological relationships within a family. The Chinese family views

intergenerational obligations as paramount to those within the nuclear family. Parents have a vested interest in rearing their young, and the young are taught to respect their elders; however, the task of caring for grandparents and other elderly relations often supersedes the afore mentioned relationships. It is this emphasis on Kluckhohn's third category, that of lineage, which distinguishes Chinese culture.

America offers free education and opportunities for economic advancement. These are the factors which usually attract Asian families to emigrate to America. The new Chinese immigrants, unlike their forefathers, arrived determined to assimilate into America. Earlier waves of Chinese immigrants came to America as sojourners intent on making quick money and then returning to China. To move to the west is usually a parental aspiration, although Chinese children have long harbored romanticized views of the opulence of Western society. Young people in particular, have been victim ized by their lack of preparation. For little children, adjustment is not as severe as for teenagers.

Jean Takeshita, a multicultural resource teacher (cited in Fischer, 1988) said, "junior and senior high school students who have come here in recent years are having the most difficult time adjusting" (p. 15). Most of these young Chinese came here not of their own choosing; they had to split from their peer groups in Hong Kong, Mainland China, Taiwan, or some other Asian country, and were forced into a strange land. Chinese children often only have the choice of obeying their parents. Sue and Kirk (cited in Kitano, 1980) suggested that the Chinese culture emphasizes tradition, obedience, and respect for authority, as well as discouraging individualism. Additionally, family loyalty and unity are paramount virtues. Yao (1978) found in his study that Chinese children were expected to be totally obedient and subservient to their elders. Chinese children had basically no voice at home, and voicing their opinions is still not acceptable.

Gentry (1981) pointed out that the Chinese family constellation has traditionally been struc tured on the extended family model. The agrarian, rural nature of China necessitated large families in order to survive. In spite of the Cultural Revolution, the Maoist ideology that emphasizes the need of society seems to continue to take precedence over the needs of the individual. Pikcunas (1986) said that,

> the Chinese student also seeks conformity, obedience, and group dependence. Perseverence and attention to task is essential in the development of the Chinese student. In light of the Chinese cultural characteristics, the behaviors to be fostered are sharing, helpfulness, friendliness, coopera tion, uniformity, and self-control. Appropriate behaviors such as self-control and conformity are to be expected. Just as punishment is to be conducted privately in order to save "face," recognition and reward of individual performance is to be avoided. The Chinese student also has a highly reflective response style that requires additional "wait-time" in order to respond to the particular question. (p. 25)

Asian children tend to be field-dependent or structure-oriented learners. Yao (1985) indicated that because of definite goals and specific tasks, Asian children require reinforcement, rather than subjective questioning or opinion-based instruction from teachers. Additionally, Yao (1985) found that Asian children learn best in well structured, quiet environments. Asian students were less likely to reveal their opinions, tended to hide their abilities, and seldom challenged their instructors. Peterson (1983) and West (1983) indicated that the greatest strength of American education may be in the preparation of critical and individualistic thinkers; the Asian student brings an element of discipline and selflessness to this task. Asian education emphasizes rote memorization and drill in the place of critical challenge and appreciation, they might perform poorly in creative writing and analytical com mentary. Asian children are inclined to seek the teacher's approval and to make decisions based on the teacher's choices. Immigrant children from Asia have the possibility of expanding their learning skills as part of the task of assimilating the new American culture which they have

entered. However, the road which connects the best of both worlds is bumpy and a difficult path to follow. Many stu dents from Asia are never able to overcome this rift between instructional techniques, and as a conse quence, do not succeed in their studies. Other Asian students are able to find the advantages in the American educational system and thrive in the new and different learning atmosphere. Stevenson and Lee (1990) pointed out that, in the American culture, the individual is responsible for his or her accomplishments and difficulties; in others, such as the Chinese culture, members of the family, teach ers, or a larger group are expected to hold some of the responsibility. As a Chinese proverb says, "When we all contribute wood the fire is the biggest." Stevenson and Lee (1990) add:

> As the interdependence among individuals increases, their mutual obligations to each other also increase. Individuals in such a situation work hard not only to satisfy their own goals but also to meet the goals set by their families and teachers, and the success of the group is valued as highly as the success of particular individuals within the group. (p. 6)

Chinese culture has always emphasized effort over innate ability. Whereas Western theologi cal constructs (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) reward supplication to a personified deity with good ness and paradise, Asian philosophical systems (Shintoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism) reiterate the ethos of labor and personal effort in the present life. Chinese culture draws upon Confucian dictums (proverbs) of nature and the harvest to comfort individuals while reinforcing the group. China, Japan, Taiwan, and other countries influenced by the Confucian belief in human malleability are among the cultures that place great weight on the possibility of advancement through effort (Brand, 1987; Butterfield, 1986; Caplan et al., 1992; Schneider & Lee, 1990; Stevenson & Lee, 1990).

Where American cultural values look hopefully to the up-and-coming generation, Chinese culture reflects back upon ancestors and the generations of the elders. A deep-seated agrarian mindset ties Chinese culture to the cycles of nature and the virtues of the older rings in the family tree. Tradi tionally, in China, parents generally decide what is good or bad as well as the future of their children.

It seems that new Asian-American students work harder in school than those who settled in the United States for several generations. Dornbusch, Reed-Hodgson, Prescott, and Ritter (1987) have found that the level of academic achievement among Asian-American children tends to be inversely related to the number of generations which have resided in the United States. In other words, over time, assimilation into a new society dissipates the advantages of being able to draw on resources from the old country. A child's Asian values of selflessness, discipline, and respect for education give way to the American-style cynicism of the peer group. Collegiate level Chinese immigrants affirm that their chosen academic major was influenced by their English language skills. Sue and Okazaki (1990) stated that, in addition, it is highly likely that the recent immigrants perceive career limitations and, therefore, avoid those fields, such as the social sciences and humanities, in which English facility and interpersonal skills specific to American society are needed. Mathematics and sciences are more likely to emphasize technical competence. Sue and Okazaki (1990) also stated that there is evidence from various sources that many Asian-Americans perceive limitations in their career choices or up ward mobility because of English language skills or social discrimination.

The Parents' Influence

Many children have been taught to read at home (Binkley, 1988; Smethurst, 1975). The home environment is very friendly and compliant to the individual needs of the child. Parents offer guid ance to teach their children to develop reading habits before they go to school. Children who begin to read at home do at least as well, and in many instances better, in the first grade (Binkley, 1988; Smethurst, 1975). Contrary to

popular opinion, learning reading does not begin in school. Learning to read begins at home (Binkley, 1988). Parents naturally become their children's first teacher and usually can help them to develop reading habits before they set foot inside a school (Binkley, 1988; Rasinski & Fredericks, 1988). Binkley (1988) and Rasinski and Fredericks (1988) stated that children naturally learn to talk by following examples. Reading experience was acquired by learning and instruction, often from one's parents. If a stimulating environment, encouragement, and a calm parental attitude can be provided, reading and writing can develop in the same natural way as spoken language (Carrasquillo & London, 1993; Cohn, 1981). Holdaway (1979) and Rasinski and Fredericks (1988) stated that young children learn naturally when their parents read to them and let them handle books at home. By handling books, children gain direct information about the printed word, and learn the language an conventions of print. They learn that the language of books can be as meaningful as the oral language of their daily lives (Cohn, 1981).

The very best parent-child activities are those that allow parents to support their children's endeavors (Rasinski & Fredericks, 1988). Parents need to make reading easy. Wells (1987) also be lieves that parents should make reading easier for their children by giving suitable framework activi ties, giving them interpretation, and answering their questions. Rasinski and Fredericks (1988) pointed out that interaction is also important in the success of parent-child literary efforts. It is very helpful to get children involved in asking and answering questions, because this activity tends to reduce the formality of a task. Children often feel at ease when they work out problems with their parents.

Another factor in the studies of young readers is that reading is "done" in the environment. Children must learn what function print in the environment serves. Children must initially learn that the print in the environment is meaningful (Rasinski & Fredericks, 1988; Teale, 1978). By getting in touch with a variety of printed materials or being surrounded by printed materials, children will understand the function of written language. Reading "environmental print" is the basic way by which children come to realize the function of written language. The environment generally plays an important role. The environment is a contributing factor in the development of reading ability in children (Teale, 1978). Yao (1985) states that the Asian parent-child relationship has changed as a result of Western influence. Children are more open-minded, express their opinions more freely, and are more independent like their American friends. Yao (1981) found that Chinese-American parents affirm their authority less as they adopt American methods of child rearing; they were much more tolerant in child rearing than Americans have discovered them to be. Yao also pointed out that immigrant children can adopt to an English-speaking environment much faster than their parents. Yao (1985) found out that when English becomes a child's primary conversational language, parents have difficulty communicating with them in their native tongue. The bilingual proficiency of parents and children differs because their primary languages are not the same. Subsequently, poor communi cation between parents and their children frequently leads to learning and behavioral problems in schools (Yao, 1985).

Most immigrant Asian parents have high expectations of their children's performance in school. They still value education highly and believe that a good education will eventually offer a good liv ing; thus, they put immense pressure on their children to strive for academic excellence. Education has always been considered a ladder leading to a better and higher social status (Schneider & Lee, 1990; Smith & Billiter, 1985; Yao, 1979a, 1979b, 1985).

Butterfield (1986) shows us a classic example of these values in Katherine Chen, who gradu ated on June of 1993 at the top of her class from Lowell High School in San Francisco. The school has been the city's most prominent public school, with admission based on a combination of grade point average and competitive exams. Now 65% of the students in her school are Asian Americans and almost 60% of the students are female. Miss Chen, who plans to enroll at Stanford University and eventually become a doctor, was a

straight "A" student in high school. Butterfield (1986) described this student in the following words: "In the Chinese family," she said, "education is very important because parents see it as the way to achieve" (p. 21). Miss Chen went on to explain that Chinese parents cultivate an environment conducive to study. Chinese grandparents, aunts, uncles and cous ins reinforce this belief in education. Education is not a chore but a way of life in the Chinese family.

As Butterfield (1986) reported, Miss Chen usually did four hours of homework every night. Her mother made her watch a little bit of television in order to get away from her books. She was not any different from many other Asian-American students, and did not date through her high school career.

An explanation for the academic success of Asian students may be the intensity of familial bonds. Sacrifice and obligation (on the part of parents and their children, respectively) are the essen tial building blocks of academic success (Smith & Billiter, 1985). Schneider and Lee (1990) stated that Asian parents are more willing than other ethnic groups to sacrifice for their children's education. They always work long hours to save money to send their children to college. Only one out of five Anglo parents said they would so the same as Asian parents do.

Lee (1984) and Schneider and Lee (1990) also found that East Asian parents have higher educa tional expectations and standards for their children than do Anglo parents. Schneider and Lee (1990) said that answers for these variations can be traced to: (a) the East Asian cultural tradition which places a high value on education for self-improvement, self-esteem, and family honor, and (b) the determination by some East Asian families to overcome occupational discrimination by investing in education. East Asian parents tended to have clearer and higher educational expectations for their children than Anglo parents. Schneider's and Lee's (1990) interviews showed that 100% of the East Asian parents are not satisfied if their children got "C's" on their tests, but the percentage for Anglo parents is 67. East Asian parents strongly believe that "if a person studied hard, he should not get a 'C'" whereas Anglo parents expressed the view that "I cannot complain too much about C's because it is average" (Schneider & Lee, 1990, p. 370).

Asian student achievements are built at a high cost. One of the major findings of Schneider's and Lee's (1990) study was that Asian students spend more time on their studies than playing or participating in social activities. Because most of their time was spent on study, they have fewer opportunities to develop their social skills (Schneider & Lee, 1990).

Butterfield (1986), Smith and Billiter (1985); and Sue and Okazaki (1990) have found that Asian -American achievement levels tend to be inversely related to the number of years in the United States; first-generation Asian immigrants have the highest expectations of their children. They also reported that the second-generation Asian Americans have higher educational achievement than those of the third generation, who have been more integrated into the mainstream culture.

Research findings (Sue & Sue, 1972) constantly show that Chinese-American parenting prac tices differ from any other ethnic groups in the United States. The traditional values in parenting practices vary according to the length of the family's stay in the United States and the degree of assimilation of the family into the dominant culture. Sue and Sue (1972) summarize:

The Chinese family is an ancient and complex institution, and the roles of family members have long been rigidly defined. Chinese are taught to obey parents, to respect elders, and to create a good family name by outstanding achievement in some aspect of life. (p. 638)

Yao (1978) mentioned that Chinese parents expect their children to be completely obedient and dutiful to their elders. Children had practically no voice in the home, and their opinions to a parent are still not widely accepted in China today. Stevenson (1992) showed that Asian parents believe more strongly than American parents in effort, rather than fixed differences in ability, and that this factor is the most important factor in accounting for learning outcomes. The importance of effort versus innate ability toward a child's success in school, motivation to succeed in school, and types of parent involvement in the school are strongly believed by the Chinese parents. The Chinese family always emphasizes effort over innate ability, which can be traced far back to the Confucian era (Caplan, et al. 1992; Schneider & Lee, 1990; Stevenson, 1992). Asian parents are quite concerned about their children's day-to-day progress, as well as greater control and supervision over after school time.

In summary, active parent involvement in the school is essential to a child's educational accomplishment.

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